

San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake and Fire Remembered

April 7, 2006

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Eddie Hosey, deputy circuit librarian, and Trish McCurdy, headquarters librarian, compiled an exhibit in remembrance of the great earthquake and fire that hit San Francisco in 1906.

An exhibit commemorating the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire that destroyed virtually the entire city is on display at the James R. Browning U.S. Courthouse, one of the few structures to survive the catastrophe 100 years ago this month.

The exhibit was unveiled during National Library Week this week. It will be on display until April 28.

Eddie Hosey, deputy circuit librarian, and Trish McCurdy, headquarters librarian, put together the exhibit with items primarily from their personal collections. They also encouraged court employees to contact friends and family who might have a relative or friend that could relay a tale of earthquake survival, or other accounts.

One contribution from Robert L. Fletcher, professor emeritus of the University of Washington School of Law, tells the story of William Whitfield, an Englishman who came to San Francisco in the early 1900s. Mr. Whitfield was a bookkeeper living in a boarding house when the earthquake struck in the early morning of April 18, 1906. Like many others, he buried a trunk with his belongings in a vacant lot to protect them from the ensuing fires, but couldn't locate it when he later returned. He eventually moved to Portland, Ore., where he raised a family next to the Fletchers. The story ends with an explanation of how Mr. Fletcher and his wife, Senior Circuit Judge Betty Binns Fletcher, came to name their son, Circuit Judge William A. Fletcher.



The U.S. Post Office and Courthouse at Seventh and Mission streets was among the few to endure the tremor and fires. Destruction of the City Hall (left) is visible in the distance. Commemorative coins, such as the one pictured at right, were sold to raise public funds.

The interactive exhibit also features panoramic photographs showing destruction in the city's Civic Center and around Union Square. In addition, library visitors may watch footage of the city before and after the disaster in the DVD entitled "San Francisco in the 1900s," which plays on a computer at the display. Through an old-fashioned stereoscope, patrons may also view images of the wreckage on individual streets, as well as of tents housing citizens who were left homeless.



Exhibit visitors may use the display's stereoscope to look at images of earthquake devastation.

A reproduction of the guest registry from an "earthquake camp" operated by the great-aunt of Ms. McCurdy is also featured. Ms. McCurdy's grandmother, Grace G. Burris, fled to the camp at the Highland Lodge in Inverness, Calif. when her family's home was destroyed. In addition to names, the registry shows caricatures of camp inhabitants drawn by an unknown guest.

Municipal reports describe which districts were destroyed by fire. Sparked primarily by broken gas mains, many of the fires burned continuously for three days. Losses from the fire totaled \$250 million, according to the reports. The official death toll at the time was 478, including the passing of the city's fire chief, Dennis T. Sullivan, which "added to the disorganization of the fire department at its most crucial time," the reports said.

Completed in the year just before the quake, the venerable federal courthouse, which at that time also housed a U.S. post office, was among the few buildings to escape major damage. "The earthquake shock did some damage to the different entrances to the building, but the walls were uninjured," according to the book "San Francisco's Great Disaster: Earthquake, Fire and Volcano, California and Vesuvius" at the display.

"The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906" by Philip L. Fradkin, also at the exhibit, describes the post office and courthouse building as suffering approximately \$500,000 worth of damage from the quake. All the glass in the building shattered, the "marble cornices tumbled, doors were torn from their hinges, law books were blown from the shelves," the book says. Nearby dynamite blasts, a method to control fires following the quake, added another \$100,000 in damage to the structure.

Deputy Circuit Librarian Hosey said many people at the time took the opportunity to capitalize on the quake destruction. For example, some authors produced books packaging earthquake accounts with stories of the aftermath of the Mount Vesuvius eruption in Italy on April 4, 1906. One of such books, entitled "The Complete History of the San Francisco Earthquake Disaster and Mount Vesuvius Horror: Death and Ruin by Eruption, Earthquake and Fire," is available at the library exhibit.

In addition to historical information, the exhibit also offers a USGS booklet with tips on earthquake preparedness. Other USGS information includes charts comparing the 1906 quake and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.